

Statement of Judith Sandalow
Executive Director
The Children's Law Center
Washington, D.C.

The U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Government Reform
May 16, 2003

Introduction

Good morning, Chairperson Davis, Representative Waxman, Representative Norton and distinguished members of the Committee. My name is Judith Sandalow, and I am the Executive Director of The Children's Law Center here in Washington, D.C. The Children's Law Center helps at-risk children in the District of Columbia find safe, permanent homes and the education, health and social services they need to flourish by providing comprehensive legal services to children, their families and foster, kinship and adoptive parents.

At The Children's Law Center, we serve as the voice for many children. We know their hopes, their fears and their dreams. We watch the teenager straighten up with pride as he shows us the paycheck from his first job. We see the excitement in a child's eyes when she is allowed to visit her sister who lives in another foster home. We also watch teenage boys resign themselves to never having a real family because they cannot control the anger brought on by years of abuse. We hear the questions that children are afraid to ask when they are taken from their families and placed with strangers.

The Children's Law Center also represents caregivers who are trying to give children the love and support that comes with being part of a family. Through our Family Permanency Project, we help foster and kinship caregivers become guardians and adoptive parents of abused and neglected children. We help them locate services so that they can stick by their children during difficult times and we celebrate with them when their love and patience teaches a child to trust them.

At a time when budgets are being evaluated and cuts are being made, it is imperative that our most vulnerable children are not forgotten. I speak today so that you will remember these children during each and every important vote.

Since the creation of the Family Court and the arrival of Ms. Golden to the Child and Family Services Agency, there has been an increased focus in the District of Columbia on improving the lives of abused and neglected children. Nonetheless, there is a long way to go before we can say with confidence that children are traveling a safe and speedy course through our child welfare system.

It is important to celebrate the achievements that Ms. Golden details in her testimony. The closing of the respite center, the dramatic reduction in numbers of young children in congregate care and the steady decrease of social worker caseloads are meaningful accomplishments. The Children's Law Center applauds these successes.

We all realize, and CFSA acknowledges, that the battle has just begun. CFSA must overcome decades of poor management, inadequate infrastructure and insufficient funding.

I would like to use my time today to discuss two areas with the hope that Ms. Golden will give to these issues some of the energy, enthusiasm and action that she has shown in other areas.

Early and Intensive Intervention

When a child is injured in a car accident, medical personnel have no qualms about stopping traffic to get an ambulance to the scene. A helicopter or an ambulance rushes the child to the hospital where a team of doctors and nurses drop everything to save a child's life or prevent permanent disability. A social worker contacts the parents, provides counseling and helps the family plan for the child's convalescence. We all recognize that without this extraordinary effort, a child will die or be permanently disabled.

The same urgency and the same resources should attend the removal of abused and neglected children from their homes. In fact, every day in the District of Columbia children are permanently scarred and irrevocably deprived of their childhoods, their emotional well-being and their chance to become productive citizens because we do not treat these first moments, these first days in foster care as an emergency.

What is right for children is also right for the DC budget. Early and intensive intervention on behalf of children will speed reunification and adoption, will reduce the number of children who languish in foster care at great cost to our city and will prevent the financial and human cost of increased homelessness, incarceration and welfare dependence that are found among adults who spent their childhoods in foster care.

I urge CFSA – with the support of targeted funding by Congress – to create an emergency team to work with children and families when a child is removed from his or her home.

What would such an emergency team do? There are three things that must be accomplished quickly: (1) find the best home for the child as fast as possible; (2) provide services and support to the child to repair the damage caused by abuse and to reduce the trauma of being separated from her family; and (3) provide the entire family with the services necessary to reunify them.

How would an emergency team accomplish these goals?

- On the day a child is removed from her home, social workers would interview the child, his or her siblings, neighbors and relatives to find an appropriate temporary caregiver for the child. Frequently, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins don't learn that a child is in foster care for weeks or months.
- Quickly conduct criminal records checks, review the child abuse registry and do a home study of the caregiver's home so that the child can move in immediately.
- Have access to a flexible fund to buy beds, clothes and if necessary food to ensure that a relative can bring a child into her home immediately, without forcing the child to stay – scared and alone – in a group home or foster home while the relative finds the money to prepare her home.
- Convene a meeting of the child's family within 24 or 48 after removal to see what resources the extended family can provide. Often, family members can step in to assist an overwhelmed parent, can arrange visits in their home for the child or can even bring a child to live with them while the parent is in recovery.
- Provide transportation to the child's home school, so that she is not further traumatized by having to adjust to a new school and a new home at the same time.
- Gather medical records from the child's pediatrician and area hospitals to ensure that medical treatment and medication are not disrupted.
- Provide drug treatment, homemaker services, parenting classes and other services a birth parent needs so that a child can be safely reunited with her parents.
- Do thorough medical and mental health assessments of children and provide mental health services to assist children during this traumatic time.
- Arrange for a child to talk on the phone with brothers, sisters and other family members during the initial, traumatic hours and days after removal.
- Provide transportation for frequent visits between children, their siblings and important family members to reduce the trauma of removal and maintain the familial bonds in preparation for reunification.

All of these tasks must be done within the first few days after a child is removed from her home. Just as we staff an emergency room around the clock and not only during business hours, we must staff a child welfare emergency team 24 hours a day.

Services for Children and Families

Early intervention won't help children if there are no services to help children heal, to rehabilitate parents and to support families. DC has an extremely limited number of mental health providers. There are very few drug treatment beds. Homemaker and intensive in-home services are almost non-existent. I applaud CFSA's recent efforts to evaluate the quality of service providers. Their attention must be turned now, however to increasing the availability of services.

The short-term cost of providing services may be great, but the long-term benefit in personal and financial savings is extraordinary. For one DC family, it made all the difference. After the death of his wife, a father of three children was extremely depressed. He managed to hold down a full-time job, get dinner on the table and was available to his children every evening after work. But, he couldn't manage to get the children dressed and ready for school in the morning and so the children missed school frequently. Limited early morning homemaker services helped to keep this family together. Obviously, the emotional and financial cost of splitting up this family pales in comparison to the short-term cost of helping them through this crisis.

The Children's Law Center receives dozens of calls each year from relative caregivers and foster parents who want to keep a child in their home, but cannot handle the extreme behavioral, medical and emotional needs of their child without assistance. The Children's Law Center's experience shows that the shortage of services is the primary reason that children stay in foster care without being adopted and that children have multiple placements without ever finding a "forever family."

Mental health services, day care and respite care are among the most important services needed to help children stabilize in their foster and kinship homes. Drug treatment, mental health and homemaker services are key to family reunification. Transportation for all of these services and for family visitation is essential.

Conclusion

A foster child is, by law, in the legal custody of the government. The government, therefore, has the legal right and responsibility to parent that foster child. To me, this means that we must treat every foster child as if she or he is our own child.

Thank you for taking that responsibility seriously and for calling for and supporting measures that will give every foster child the promise of a safe, permanent and loving home.